CHAPTER THREE

NARRATING RESISTANCE

> I believe in living.
> I believe in birth.
> I believe in the sweat of love
> and in the fire of truth.
> And I believe that a lost ship,
> steered by tired, seasick sailors,
> can still be guided home
> to port. (Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* 1)

> There was the possibility that, having read [the autobiography], more people would understand why so many of us have no alternative but to offer our lives—our bodies, our knowledge, our will—to the cause of our oppressed people. (Angela Davis, *An Autobiography* xvi)

> My eight friends and I paid for the integration of Central High with our innocence…The physical and psychological punishment we endured profoundly affected all our lives. It transformed us into warriors who dared not cry even when we suffered intolerable pain…I became an instant adult, forced to take stock of what I believed and what I was willing to sacrifice to back up my beliefs. (Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry* 13)

This chapter aims to examine four autobiographical texts written by Black American women who were actively engaged in resistance politics, especially the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1950s and 1960s. The chosen texts are Melba Pattillo Beals's *Warriors Don't Cry* (1994), Angela Davis' An Autobiography (1974), Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987), and Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power* (1992). The chapter examines how these texts not only provide thorough documentation of the participation of the writers in resistance politics but also re-examines the process through which their lives are transformed from private selves to public figures. In other words, these texts work with resistance at two levels. On the one hand, there is resistance to discrimination, injustice and White racism. On the other hand, there is a more subtle resistance to the presentation of public memories regarding their transformation into useful figures of public heroism or community heroism.

All these texts offer examinations of the lives of the writers. Significantly, they also offer explicit and implicit re-examination of how the public perceives them. The

authors via their autobiographies question the multiple passages to their public perception. Further, the chapter shows how these autobiographical texts theorise life and life-writing: one, by allowing real life events and their presentation in life writing as distinct and distinguishable tropes and two, by allowing these tropes to feed off each other. As life turns to life writing, we find a triadic frame where an event in life is presented as a transformed event in life writing by way of explanation, supplement, and substitution. In other words, life and writing are presented as not only mutually interwoven but also as interpenetrating. In all the texts under scrutiny, life and life writing enrich each other. To put it differently, these autobiographical texts help reinvent lives that are already reinvented through politics. This chapter, thus, examines the relationship of persons to politics, the transformation of life through politics and the 're-transformation' of that journey through writing.

The objectives of this chapter are:

- To analyse Black American women's autobiography in the light of social, psychological and sexual trauma
- To examine how resistance is used as a way out of trauma and how it invites further entanglements
- To show how Black American women's autobiography deals with resistance to trauma and offers a passage to healing

The chapter works with the following hypotheses:

- that social action can be a response to trauma
- that resistance to injustice gives one a sense of dignity
- that activism leads to further trauma

Barbara Harlow, in *Resistance Literature*, tries to establish the context(s) for the emergence of an arena of writings devoted chiefly to countering hegemonies of oppression and reverting balance(s) of power. She traces the first use of the term to 1966 when Ghassan Kanafani's *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966* came out. Kanafani's work, where he explores how the seemingly innocuous field of literature can be a site of struggle and battle, was, of course, limited to his geopolitical region and sociocultural milieu. However, much as literatures of resistance emerge out of their specific contexts, they share certain commonalities of thought and expression. Harlow

cites critics from different geographical locations so as to establish this common ground even as she remains cautious against universalist appropriations. Resistance literature, for instance, according to critics like Kanafani and Manuel Maldonado Denis whom she mentions, emerge out of immediate conditions of struggles and armed opposition, and hence, an objective, dispassionate stance cannot be expected as such. Aimed with revising literary studies and reformulating the grounds on which literature is analysed and investigated, these writings in the words of Eric Woolf—another scholar whom Harlow cites, are inclusive of "people without history" (4). They are an attempt, as desperate and essential as armed resistance itself, to gain a foothold over history and the literary/academic enterprise of knowledge production and dissemination that controls such historical record-keeping. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, distinguishing between the contradictory aesthetics of oppression and resistance to oppression found in literature, talks about the need for "a different organization of literary categories, one which is "participatory" in the historical processes of hegemony and resistance to domination, rather than formal or analytic" (9). Literatures of resistance tend to be obsessed with the specificity of their material conditions and time and are written primarily as a way of getting control over sociocultural, historical, and political productions (2-18).

Margo V. Perkins, in *Autobiography as Activism*, talks about how the autobiographical texts of women involved actively in resistance movements can and should be read as an extension of their activist propaganda. Such texts serve as a means of extending the political ideologies of the writers to the maximum people. The writing of autobiographies, according to Perkins, offer the chance of juxtaposing their troubled personal lives with their public battles in order to inspire "transformative action," and of "constructing an alternative history that challenges hegemonic ways of knowing" (xii). Talking about the political motivations behind engaging in the autobiographical endeavour, Perkins writes:

> [A]ctivists use life-writing as an important tool for advancing political struggle...[T]hese activists use autobiography to connect their own circumstances with those of other activists across historical periods…Activists use life-writing to recreate themselves as well as the era they recount. (xiii)

Continuing with her arguments, she further writes:

> Many things are at stake for them in the process. These things include control of the historical record, control over their own public images, and control over how the resistance movement in which they are involved is defined and portrayed. In the case of those narratives that are directly tied to impending struggle, activists may even be writing to save their own lives. (ibid)

The writing, thus, becomes fraught with the tension of justifying one's political standpoints. The autobiographical project might call for the overlapping of the personal and the public spheres, but the private struggles hold meaning only in so far as they validate the writers' political choices. Perkins goes on to list the "expectations" put upon "political autobiography" —the term she uses for activist narratives after Angela Davis's coinage of the term— in particular and resistance literature in general:

> (1) that the autobiographer will emphasize the story of the struggle over her own personal ordeals; (2) that she will use her own story both to document a history of the struggle and to further its political agenda; (3) that she will provide a voice for the voiceless; (4) that she will honour the strategic silences in order to protect the integrity of the struggle as well as the welfare of other activists; (5) that she will expose oppressive conditions and the repressive tactics of the state; and (6) that she will use the autobiography as a form of political intervention, to educate as broad an audience as possible to the situation and issues at stake. (7)

Such specific focus on the challenges put forth by political autobiography to authoritarian regimes, thus, leads to the textual erasure of the personal dimensions to activists' lives and sufferings. The deep private traumas and setbacks experienced in the course of public battles get marginalized when resistance is seen and understood only in terms of a "language of empowerment," (xii) an expression Perkins borrows from Henry Giroux.

In this sense, the fact that the writers examined here participated in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, is crucial to the form of their autobiographies. Melba Patillo Beals (b.-1941) was one of the Little Rock Nine, who as a teenager, took the extremely bold and personally devastating decision to be one of the first nine students to integrate Little Rock's Central High School, an all-white premiere institute of the time. The integration of the school made possible by the 1954 Brown v/s Board of Education ruling has been a landmark achievement of the Civil Rights Movement. The Supreme Court legislation, however, did little to prevent the violence that accompanied the process of

desegregation. To young Beals, Central High turned into a battle ground where she as a schoolchild was forced to take on the garb of a revolutionary. Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown were active members of the Black Power Movement, with Brown even reaching the top echelons of power in the Black Panther Party. The Black Power Movement—the more radical and violent offshoot of the Civil Rights Movement—has been one of the most prominent chapters of the Black struggle in America, the impact of which is felt even today. The autobiographies of different Black Power activists serve as important reference documents for understanding the movement.

While we realise the importance of recognizing activist narratives as a tool for political propaganda, the present chapter, as already stated, intends to study the autobiographies of the chosen authors not simply in terms of their association with active resistance but also for their showcasing of the interrelation between historical, socio-political trauma and activism. The texts document the politicised self's journey through her struggles with the state machinery, state sponsored bodily and psychological tortures, detainment and further exposure to violence from the prison authorities as seen in the case of Davis and Shakur. At the same time, they also bring to light the often-unwanted experiences from life—poverty, struggles ensuing from racist, sexist, and class denigrations, consequent self-doubts etc.—that instigate the process of coming into political consciousness. They expose how the political demography gets expanded and restructured with the politicisation of the repressed sections. More importantly, the texts exemplify how this politicisation is a direct response to the actual, lived material conditions of the authors' lives and not merely a fascinated indulgence in the rhetoric of feminism, nationalism, postcolonialism or such. Similarly, as stated earlier, the immediate goal of the autobiographical project is also not to gain popular attention but is politically motivated. Harlow, in her essay, "From the Women's Prison," cites H. Bruce Franklin's notion of writers writing exclusively from an experience of being incarcerated:

> People who have become literary artists because of their imprisonments tend to write in an autobiographical mode. The reason is obvious: it is their own personal experience that has given them both their main message and the motive to communicate it. (455)

The very act of writing is, thus, motivated from a desire to publicize the otherwise personally felt experiences of oppression and injustice and, thereby, to possibly change the

social structure that allows such repression of a particular community. Since their writings condemn the oppressive authoritarian structures, the very act of writing connects the writer with the general masses in their struggle against power.

Harlow shows how the conventions of literature themselves get transformed in the process of using the medium of the written word as a political weapon. To quote from her again:

> In the same way that institutions of power…are subverted by the demand on the part of dispossessed groups for an access to history, power, and resources, so too are the narrative paradigms and their textual authority being transformed by the historical and literary articulation of those demands. (ibid)

The critic, here, is of course referring to the manipulation of literary forms by authors from 'dispossessed' sections and the way such interventions write their way into history. However, a sole focus or emphasis on empowerment—attained via participation in political resistance and/or through the process of writing—might paradoxically fail to take note of the actual socio-historical/political conditions that deprive people of their agency and thereby, necessitate such actual/textual struggles. In other words, the relation between social inequities/injustices and resistant action might tend to get underrepresented. This chapter, therefore, contends that we need to pay some critical attention to the trauma-activism equation.

The co-relation between race-induced psychic sufferings and emergent resistant action is especially relevant in studies that focus on Black resistance movements and activism. When trauma is generated from repeated exposures to social abuse and exploitation, as is the case with racial trauma, it loses its capacity to shock and overwhelm. And because such trauma no longer remains a single catastrophic encounter and becomes an everyday familiar thing, healing can occur only when that everyday reality is altered. In the case of victims of continuous trauma, therefore, one mechanism of recovery is meaningful social action. Radical activist action offers the hope for a positive alteration in one's social reality. It offers victims of the continuous trauma of abuse and injustice the possibility of overcoming their shattered sense of self and dignity and thereby, endows them with a sense of agency over their perceived destiny. Activism, thus, proffers a new meaning and purpose to one's otherwise battered existence.

Vivienne Matthies-Boon in her deliberation on activist trauma in post-revolutionary Egypt comments:

> Reinterpreting a traumatic experience in light of positive outcomes means one can say that 'it has been worth it', which makes the world appear less random and hostile. Reinterpretation does not occur in isolation but in an intersubjective relation to others, and takes two forms: the personal lessons learnt and the structural benefits for self and others. (626)

Speaking of the second form in which reinterpretation occurs, she further writes:

> The latter, which is more likely to occur than the former after human-inflicted trauma entails the reinterpretation of traumatic experiences as having served a purpose such as better labour conditions or greater political freedoms…Through such perceived positive outcomes, 'trauma survivors are able to establish some meaning and benevolence even in the midst of meaninglessness and malevolence.' (ibid)

Trauma and activism can be seen as mutually overlapping, with traumatic experiences inviting action and activism leading to further exposure to state sponsored violence. Activists have to always deal with the fear of possible re-traumatization in the form of physical and psychological torture. In this regard, this chapter, as already stated in the beginning, seeks to understand what drives the selected autobiographers to activism in the face of devastating trauma. It seeks to comprehend the socio-psychological mechanisms at work in the case of people committed to social action. It, thus, proposes to fill the gap in the existing literature so far as increased empathy and commitment to social action as an aftermath of trauma is concerned.

Warriors Don't Cry

As has already been mentioned, Melba Beals' *Warriors Don't Cry* is a moving narrative of the author's experiences of having been one of the nine children to integrate Little Rock, Arkansas's Central High School. Although the memoir was published only in 1994, it deals with events that unfolded after the 1954 Brown v/s Board of Education ruling. From the very first pages of the text, readers are made aware of the trauma the child Beals had to endure throughout and even before the process of integration actually starts. Indeed, the "Author's Note" prefixed to the autobiography hints at elements of posttraumatic stress

disorder (PTSD) in her behaviour when she mentions how flashbacks of the traumatic instances keep recurring at the slightest pretexts:

> Memories leap out in a heartbeat, summoned by the sound of a helicopter, the wrath in a shouting voice, or the expression on a scowling face. (*Warriors* 11)

Similarly, speaking of the psychic sufferings which had made the task of writing her autobiography impossible, even though the first draft had been started at the age of eighteen itself, she writes:

> [B]ut in the ensuing years, I could not face the ghosts that its pages called up. During intervals of renewed strength and commitment, I would find myself compelled to return to the manuscript, only to have the pain of reliving my past undo my good intentions. (ibid)

Beals, however, is cautious to establish her credibility as the authentic, reliable narrator of *Warriors*. The adult author recounting her experiences in her autobiography, thus, asserts that although she has not been able to come out of her memories—she "remember(s) being inside Central High School as though it were yesterday" (ibid)—the temporal distance of more than three decades separating her from the events she narrates has helped her rediscover a sense of agency:

> Now enough time has elapsed to allow healing to take place, enabling me to tell my story without bitterness. (ibid)

Here, she specifically points out how with the passage of time the ability of her memories—which remain fresh "as though it were yesterday"—to induce pain or psychic handicap has passed away. She has recovered from her traumas enough to be able to deliver an authoritative account of her experience of the integration.

If Beals reiterates the sense of having been traumatised as a child, it is to bring forth the often-unrecognised causal relation between trauma and self-sacrificial political or activist action. When political action is intended against oppressive regimes and as such brings one face to face with the structures of power, the agent of such actions becomes a sacrificial hero(ine) willing to lay down his/her life for the betterment of society. In *Warriors Don't Cry*, we see the child Beals being transformed too early in life into a "warrior" burdened with the task of bringing about a supposedly collective good for her

people, that of desegregation. And she becomes a warrior in an almost literal sense as such as Central High School changes into a battlefield with angry white segregationist mobs ready to even kill the Little Rock Nine.

As she is thrown in at the deep end, Beals is warned by her bodyguard, Danny from the 101st Airborne division:

> It takes a warrior to fight a battle and survive. This here is a battle if I've ever seen one. (144)

The statement comes in the context of a pep rally that Beals had to attend on the second day of school under the protection of the armed guards of the 101st Airborne division. Already used to the safety symbolised by the presence of Danny, she is mortified on realising that her protector would not be allowed into the rally:

> Nothing had frightened me more than suddenly being folded into the flow of that crowd of white students as they moved toward the auditorium…I was crammed into that dimly lit room among my enemies, and I knew I had to keep watch every moment…I worked myself into a frenzy anticipating what might happen. My stomach was in knots and my shoulder muscles like concrete. (143)

Beals's hyperactive vigilance along with her physical reactions are indicative of the extent of her emotional turmoil. Here, the author, once again, consciously renders her experiences in terms of PTSD. In "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: The History of a Recent Concept" (1992), Gersons and Carlier talk about how hypersensitivity or heightened emotions can result from an excessive exposure to traumatic stimuli. The hypervigilance is a sort of paranoid defence mechanism adopted to avoid any future traumatic stressor. Situations such as these show how the basic modes of relating to the external world can be affected in the case of activists.

Beals's worst fears, however, come true when on her way out of the auditorium after the rally, she is assaulted by a White student who pins her against the wall, strangles her, and warns her about making her life "hell" (ibid). The child author's realisation of the magnitude of the battle she had driven herself into gets reflected in her diary entry that night:

> After three full days inside Central, I know that integration is a much bigger word than I thought. (144)

Beals' initial naivete regarding the extent of the physical and emotional sacrifices expected from her and her gradual recognition of the magnitude of the problem brings to the fore how hapless children are forcefully politicised by circumstances and events not within their control.

Indeed, one of the greatest sacrifices demanded of activists like Beals, as the title of the autobiography suggests, is the expectation that they refrain from showing any sense of vulnerability. This forced pressure to not give vent to one's emotions brings about an emotional numbness which further increases the chances of being traumatised. The freedom to cry, to give vent to one's frustrations and sufferings is a basic human defence against being overwhelmed by emotions. When this fundamental and spontaneous mode of expression is taken away, healing in the aftermath of trauma becomes difficult if not impossible. And it is especially so in such cases as that of Beals where the agents are not any well-trained members of political groups or organisations, but rather ordinary people suddenly swung into the forefront of political battles. What makes Beals' trauma more heart-rendering is the fact that in her case it is a mere child whom circumstances forcefully politicise and turn into "a warrior who doesn't cry." As the epigraph from Beals' autobiography indicates, the text reveals the author's agonizing over the lost innocence of childhood. Her narrative journey, thus, takes readers into a process of gradual politicisation and is reflective of how innocent children transform into politicized people.

Angela A. Ards, in *Words of Witness: Black Women's Autobiography in the Post-Brown Era*, says that Beals capitalises on her trauma to show the tensions inherent in any project that forces children into the midst of political battles. She brings in the Hannah Arendt-Ralph Ellison debate on the appropriateness of using children as political weapons to illustrate how memoirs like Beals's *Warriors* "traffic in tropes of violated children to explore cultural anxieties" (*Words of Witness* 36). While the 1954 Supreme Court ruling to initiate the integration of all educational institutions by degrees had been generally received with a celebratory discourse, the sufferings endured by Beals and the other eight children who took on the arduous task of integrating Central High School as enumerated in the text expose the limits of such positive, enthusiastic views.

The Arendt-Ellison dichotomy issued from the former's hugely critical stand on the Little Rock campaign's use of schoolchildren as opposed to the latter's foregrounding of the same in a discourse of ethics and sacrifice. As cited by Ards, Arendt in her essay, "Reflections on Little Rock," "took the NAACP to task for putting schoolchildren on the front line of a political campaign" (39). Ellison, on the other hand, understood the same in terms of a "longstanding ethic of Christian sacrifice that underwrote political action within traditional black political thought" (ibid). Ards suggests how Beals' narrative plays out the tension between these two opposing viewpoints by its implicit critique of Ellison's ideas under an apparent glorification of the Christian ideals of sacrifice. Early on in her life, the child author is indoctrinated by her grandmother, India regarding her obligations towards fulfilling God's duties. Beals's being born on Pearl Harbour Day and surviving a near fatal scalp infection right after birth seem only to accentuate this entrustment of a messianic role upon her, "the nightmare that had surrounded my birth was proof positive that destiny had assigned me a special task" (*Warriors* 14). She was expected to live out her preordained life.

When she is selected as one of the nine children to integrate Central High School, her grandmother, therefore, sees this as an unfolding of the grand task that she had been destined for:

> "Now you see, that's the reason God spared your life. You're supposed to carry this banner for our people." (16)

The child Beals is, thus, made to realise her 'divinely' entrusted role as a harbinger of hopes for her people too early in life. Similarly, any injustice or setback is sought to be understood in terms of an indecipherable divine plan—with success and happiness surely coming to those who do not question God's objectives. For instance, faced with their sense of handicap against White misappropriation of power, Grandmother India regains her composure only by recalling what the Bible says:

> "And Ethiopia shall stretch forth her wings." With a smile on her face and fire in her eyes she said, "Be patient, our people's turn will come. You'll see. Your lifetime will be different from mine. I might not live to see the changes, but you will. . . . Oh, yes, my child, you will." (26-27)

Surrounded by a family atmosphere dominated by the scriptures, Beals is expected to learn the importance of patience and sacrifice even as a child. She is God's child, as suggested by her family, entrusted with the task of relieving her people from the shackles of segregation and as such has to be ready to make any sacrifice demanded of her. When Beals feels too burdened with the whole exercise of integration and wants to back away, her grandmother reminds her of the sacrifices demanded on the part of God's warriors by humming a hymn from the Bible, "I'm on the Battlefield for My Lord" (217). She presents it as an obligation to fulfil God's commands for the benefit of others.

Warriors Don't Cry, then, seems to endorse Ellison's views that sacrifice has been a trope in African American resistance politics since the very beginning. However, Beals's constant reminder of the trauma she had had to endure in the name of integration betrays her ambiguity towards the whole enterprise. In line with Arendt's critique of the violation of children's rights in the name of politicising them, Beals exposes the inherent problems in any discourse that links sacrifice with freedom (Ards). At one point, overwhelmed by the verbal as well as physical violence from her segregationist friends and their parents, she writes in her diary:

> It's hard being with Little Rock white people. I don't know if I can do this integration thing forever…I want to run away now. I want a happy day. (140)

In another instance, the child Beals's frustration over having to sacrifice basic pleasures of life like hanging out with friends or enjoying 'wrestling matches' gets reflected in her diary entry:

> Freedom is not integration…Freedom is being able to go with Grandma to the wrestling matches. (83)

This naïve association of "freedom" with getting to go to the "wrestling matches" points to her childhood innocence and the inability to comprehend the gravity of affairs. The adult author's citation of these diary entries in her autobiography, however, serves to show her disillusionment with political battles in which ordinary people—in her case ordinary children—end up losing much more than what they had bargained for.

This understanding of "freedom" as not some lofty ideal but an everyday uninhibited ability to act according to choice exposes how things that are projected as set collective goals often do not represent a unanimous collective voice. *Warriors* implicitly

hints at the less acknowledged fact that in achieving a common good, a section of the people ends up sacrificing a lot more than the rest, thereby making their trauma more prominently felt. In this regard, Ards mentions political theorist Danielle Allen's views on the importance of 'shared sacrifice,'

> [S]acrifice must be shared and recognized for the democratic social contract to work. Allen explains that decisions for "the common good" always have those who benefit less or who are actually harmed. In democracies, the practices and habits by which citizens accept communal decisions with which they disagree, or that disadvantage them, must rest on a highly developed notion of reciprocity, of mutual sacrifice. (*Words of Witness* 49)

Such sense of mutual sacrifice is what Beals finds lacking. Her feelings of loss and alienation are multiplied greatly by the absence of any empathy towards her in her own community. Beals' decision to be one of the nine students to integrate Central High School, thereby incurring the wrath of the majority white population, is seen by them as a betrayal of the community's safety and therefore, a reason to isolate her.

On her first day of going to Central High School, for instance, Beals had to deal with the unfriendly gestures of otherwise "friendly" neighbours and friends:

> Our neighbours…peered at us without their usual smiles. Then I saw Kathy and Ronda, two of my schoolfriends, standing with their mothers. Anxious to catch their attention, I waved out the window with a loud "Hi." Their disapproving glances matched those of the adults. (*Warriors* 52-53)

Indeed, one of the most devastating consequences of being involved in the integration for the author is her rejection by her immediate circle of friends. The sense of alienation is most shockingly realised when Beals has to spend her sixteenth birthday—an occasion for which she had been eagerly waiting for many months—all alone as none of her invited group of friends arrive. When she confronts her friend, Marsha regarding this, the latter explains to her, ""Melba, the truth is we're all afraid to come to your house"" (197). Her diary entry for that night shows the young Beals' frustration and helplessness over the cost she was having to pay for the sake of integration:

> *Please, God, let me learn how to stop being a warrior. Sometimes I just need to be a girl.* (199)

This desire for normalcy on the part of the child author shows how her trauma shatters the basic modes of relating to the world. In cases of continuous exposure to trauma, one way through which victims try to maintain their sanity and intellectual well-being is by sharing their stories of pain in the presence of empathetic others.

Vivienne Matthies Boon, for instance, speaking in the context of activist trauma in post-revolutionary Egypt and drawing on the works of scholars like Plett and Stolorow comments on the importance of a "social holding space":

> To 'hold space' means to walk alongside another person 'without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgement and control.' (625)

Stressing on the necessity of such a space, she further continues:

> The availability of a social holding space is crucial for the potential rearticulation of broken assumptive worlds, since it recognises the (often inexpressible) reality of anxiety and loneliness in which the victim now lives. (625-626)

Boon's "holding space" is one where empathic listeners validate the trauma victim's account of having suffered and thereby facilitate the healing process. The breakdown of the "assumptive worlds" means the taking away of the basic foundational beliefs regarding good and evil, action and consequence which give a sense of order and meaning to life and serve as some kinds of anchor. Beals tries to maintain a sense of meaning by placing her sufferings in terms of Christian sacrifice. However, there is a breakdown of order when she faces the unjust wrath of White segregationists and her 'good' deeds and sacrifice are met with contempt by her own community.

Beals' narrative endorses the importance of non-judgemental support groups. Her text shows how trauma ensuing from political action magnifies in the absence of communal support. To quote Matthies Boon again:

> [S]upportive relational contexts provide the possibility for devastating emotional pain to be held and rendered more tolerable, whilst recognising the victim's world has been fundamentally altered. (626)

The community, whose common interest activists fight for, is expected to provide support and protection to the latter. When the protective kinship which makes trauma "more tolerable" is missing, there is an existential crisis. Now the activist victim can no longer associate any meaningful social change or uplift with her actions. This lack of empathy might go on to heighten the sense of futility of one's actions as is seen in Beals' repeated questioning of the cost she had to pay in the name of integration.

Such questioning is also seen in the way Beals presents the day of the Supreme Court ruling. While media houses across the world flashed the announcement as a landmark decision marking the victory of the Civil Rights Movement, Beals's autobiography presents no such celebratory account. In fact, she remembers the day in terms of the oddly anxious behaviour displayed by the teachers and a most traumatic incident that took place that very day: the attempt by a White man to rape her. While the teacher asserted that the court judgement in favour of integration was "something to celebrate" (31), her face showed no sign of happiness. Instead of celebrating the historic court decision, students were rushed home with warnings to be extra cautious on the way. The thing that remains etched in the author's memory and continues to haunt her long after is, however, her molestation and attempted rape. On her way back home, Beals takes a familiar shortcut and is lost in her daydreams when suddenly she is affronted by a white male. This man tries to rape the child as a sort of retaliation for the Supreme Court decision. As Beals recalls:

> [H]e started talking about "niggers" wanting to go to school with his children and how he wasn't going to stand for it. (33)

What makes the encounter all the more terrible for Beals is the fact that at the time she had never heard about rape and hence couldn't understand what the man was trying to do her. The only thing she could make out was that something really "awful and dirty" (35) was being sought to be done to her. It is the coming of her otherwise considered "retarded" friend, Marissa who bangs the white man's "head with her leather book bag" (34) and manages to save her from her ordeal. Later, on reaching home, her grandmother's decision that having a bath and burning her clothes would "take away all that white man's evil" (35) seems only to magnify Beals' sense of shame.

The child author's traumatised response to the event is evident in the way it makes her associate the Supreme Court ruling not with hopes of ground-breaking changes but as the reason behind her attempted rape. Once again, her diary entry is indicative:

> It's important for me to read the newspaper, every single day God sends, even if I have to spend my own nickel to buy it. I have to keep up with what the men on the Supreme Court are doing. That way I can stay home on the day the justices vote decisions that make white men want to rape me. (35-36)

Beals' attempts to link her safety to the Supreme Court ruling seems to show a young child's misguided understanding of the situation. Allison Berg, in "Trauma and Testimony in Black Women's Civil Rights Memoirs," has pointed out how the child author "seems to misconstrue the relationship between literacy, sexuality and the law, naively assuming that a vigilant attitude towards knowledge will enable her to "read" the law in ways that allow her to evade its racialized and gendered effects" (94). While the diary entry is suggestive of the child's innocence and inability to comprehend the situation, the adult author's mention of it exposes the irony of the entire situation. It shows that the best efforts of the court and sensitive people are not enough to protect vulnerable people from the racists. While the child thinks in terms of her personal security as she has to face frequent physical attacks, what is alluded to in the adult narrator's words is that there is a section in America which refuses to see reason or accept change. Talking about "how intensely sexual white Americans' relations have been to African American people," Berg hints at how the "circuits of erotic and political dominance" are interconnected (ibid). Since the Black woman's body has been a site of asserting power and control, bringing to the fore stories and accounts of such violations plays an important role in any act of resistance.

Although the White man's attempt to rape her is thwarted by the advent of Marissa, the author mentions being haunted by the memory even long after. In fact, she presents herself as a victim of PTSD with her recounting of how court proceedings that made reference to the 1954 decision brought back flashbacks of her White would-be rapist:

> The very mention of that decision always made me sad. It brought back the face of the angry white man who had chased me down that day. Panic-filled recollections flooded my mind, blotting out the courtroom proceedings. (*Warriors* 98)

The “blotting out” indicates the power of such flashbacks to numb her mind. Although the mention of the entire episode of the attempted rape and its aftereffects serve to indicate Beals’ childhood trauma, it also points out how the author “complicates conventional civil rights chronology when she presents the 1954 Brown v Board of Education decision as responsible, most immediately, for a white man’s attempting to rape her, and only secondarily, for enabling her entrance into Little Rock’s all-white Central High School” (Berg 86). Beals’ childhood experiences also point to the irrationality of White anger: unable to fight the law, grown-up White men look to vent their spleen on children. If the child did not realise that, the adult Beals must have recognized that element of irrationality and penchant for violence that governed racism.

Beals’ text, in presenting the author’s ambiguous stance towards the whole issue of integration, seems to speak for the psychologically devastating impact of unwanted childhood activism.

Angela Davis: An Autobiography

Angela Davis’ “Introduction” to the second edition of her autobiography shows her dilemma regarding the dual function that political autobiographies perform. It traces her initial reluctance to engage in a personal account of the self to her finally realising the intrinsic way in which the ‘personal’ remains connected to the ‘political.’ Speaking of the text that she had composed at the age of twenty-eight, Davis writes,

> [I]t is…an important piece of historical description and analysis of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is also my own personal history up to that time, comprehended and delineated from that vantage point. (*An Autobiography* vii)

Her “Introduction” puts forth the need to understand “the dialectics of the personal and the political” (viii).

Divided into six constitutive parts—"Nets,” “Rocks,” “Waters,” “Flames,” “Walls” and “Bridges”—Davis’ text starts with her being wanted by the FBI on (what later proves to be false) charges of active involvement in the Marin County Courtroom case, 1970. The opening part of *An Autobiography* finds the author assuming a disguise and going underground to avoid arrest. The constant fear of being arrested and rendered a victim of state sponsored repression on political activism and the sort of psychological anguish this generates is made apparent in Davis’ attempts at normalcy in the face of impending arrest,

"I tried to forget that today, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps any of a long string of days to come, might be the day of my capture" (12). When she is finally booked at the Howard Johnson motel in New York, she realises the way the FBI conspires to project its victims as dangerous terrorists or criminals by carefully staging the scene of arrest. The repeated cross-questionings, fingerprinting, handcuffing and the extreme precautions with which she was "shoved" to the "long caravan of unmarked cars" waiting to deport her to "some unknown destination" are all a part in projecting her as "one of the country's ten most wanted criminals: the big bad Black Communist enemy" (16).

Davis' initial detainment at the New York Women's House of Detention exposes to her the ways in which prison houses, more than being correction facilities, were part of the state's repressive mechanisms to control people. Commenting on the gross disparities in racial identities of the prisoners, she writes, "All the women I could see were either Black or Puerto Rican. There were no white prisoners in the group" (19). Similarly, she notes the way systemic oppression, in the form of poverty/lack of education and work opportunities, often contributes to Black people's complicity in the repression of their own fellows.

Speaking of how some of the Black women officers charged with keeping an eye on her were merely compelled by circumstances to do so despite being "sympathetic" to her and her political affiliations, Davis writes:

> [T]hey had been driven by necessity to apply for this kind of job…one of the highest-paying jobs…that did not require a college education. In a way, these officers were prisoners themselves…Like their predecessors, the Black overseers, they were guarding their sisters in exchange for a few bits of bread…[L]ike the overseers…part of the payment for their work was their own oppression. (43)

The author comments on the social structure which instead of fostering solidarity, allows and facilitates such forced divisions amongst Blacks. Continuing with her description of how these Black women officers were themselves victims of oppression, she again notes:

> [O]vertime was compulsory. And beecause of the military discipline to which they were forced to submit, failure to work overtime was punishable as insubordination. (ibid)

Davis' inclusion of such observations in the chronicling of her prison experiences exposes American society's perpetuation of discrimination, injustice, and inequality by deliberately pitching Blacks against Blacks.

The state's fear of organized resistance is also apparent in the way Davis as a political prisoner is sought to be kept away from the other common prisoners. In the New York Women's House of Detention, she is placed in 4b—an isolated wing of the prison where only those women prisoners who were supposedly 'mentally imbalanced' were kept. On questioning this arrangement, the jail authorities inform her that she had been kept there "for [her] own safety" and to prevent any disruption of jail life (32). The absurdity of such claims on the part of the prison authorities is, however, revealed when Davis has to be allowed out of her cell in 4b during a "normal hour" in order to meet her lawyers.

Women prisoners who meet her instantly recognize her and speak to her "in a cordial, sisterly way" or raise their fists "in gestures of solidarity" (33). In her autobiography, Davis writes:

> These were the "dangerous women" who might attack me because they didn't like "Communists," had I not been hidden away in 4b. This and subsequent trips to the main floor were further evidence of what I already knew: that the administration's allegations that the prison population might harm me were nonsense. (33)

The separation of Davis from the other detainees is, thus, a politically motivated administrative decision. That detainees like her may bring about a political awakening and thereby revolutionise the other inmates is a fear which looms large on the prison authorities. In this regard, Harlow comments on the way prisons impose "distinctions" on prisoners within the system:

> Important among these distinctions concerning the classification of prisoners is that, maintained by the state judicial apparatus and manipulated by the prison authorities, between common law inmates and political detainees, between those serving sentences for criminal offences…and those being held on account of their political activities. (136-137)

These distinctions are a necessary part of how the state and state machineries seek to curb the outspreading of revolutionary sentiments. As Davis' text exemplifies, such attempts at

separation fail when the common law prisoners unite with the political ones and put forth a challenge to the authorities by developing a "real togetherness" *(An Autobiography* 63).

In this regard, Davis also notes the way prisoners try to break the hold of psychological torment to which they are routinely subjected. Although prison houses are designed to deprive detainees of any sense of hope or agency, "prisoner culture"—the "rules and standards of behaviour" shielding prisoners "from the open or covert terror designed to break their spirits"—stand as a form of defence against "routines and behaviour prescribed by the governing penal hierarchy" (53).

However, in as much as she exposes the state sponsored oppression and repression of Blacks, the author also shows the way racism/racial prejudice affects the psychological integrity of Whites who internalise them. During her stay at the 4b wing of the New York Women's House of Detention, Davis comes across a White woman who had been so completely held and imprisoned by her racial prejudices that she had lost her sanity and become schizophrenic. While the author initially was enraged by the woman in question, she eventually only comes to sympathise with her, "Her illness had become a convenient vehicle for the expression of the racism which had grown like maggots in her unconscious" (34). Taking the woman as a case in hand, Davis comments on how studies of psychology fail to account for the damages incurred by internalised racism on not just the object of racist attacks but also the subject:

> How could the woman…even begin to be cured if the psychologist treating her was not aware of the way in which racism, like an ancient plague, infects every joint, muscle and tissue of social life in this country? This woman was rotting in a snake pit of racism, flagellating herself daily with her obscene and graphic imagination. (36)

The damages incurred by racism, thus, affect all sections of American society: Blacks and Whites alike.

Although Davis' text starts with her arrest and experience of prison, it is structured in a way that also allows her to recount her experiences prior to her arrest. These experiences suggest the triggers behind her coming to political consciousness. This chapter however, limits its study of the text to the way it highlights how prison apparatuses engage in depriving inmates of their subjectivity and agency. It is with Shakur's autobiography

that we focus on the ways personal experiences incite processes of politicisation and involvement in radical action.

Assata: An Autobiography

Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* starts with a song of affirmation. The poem, part of which serves as an epigraph to this chapter, is a motivational one which acknowledges the power of the human mind to transcend all atrocities. It, however, sets the note of bodily as well as mental affliction at the very beginning. With the hopes and assertions of life and living, it juxtaposes images of the misappropriation of power, death and destruction:

> I believe in life.
> And i have seen the death parade
> march through the torso of the earth,
> sculpting mud bodies in its path.
> I have seen the destruction of the daylight,
> and seen bloodthirsty maggots
> prayed to and saluted. (*Assata* 1)

The poem named "Affirmation" by Shakur, thus, can be seen as a framing of the process of coming to political consciousness by a radical Black revolutionary woman. It is the sufferings endured, the witnessing of "death parades" and "bloodthirsty maggots" and the desire to "steer" the "lost ship" of freedom and equality that serve as the inspiration behind her radical activism. Another thing that one notes in the poem and also throughout her autobiography is the strict avoidance of a capitalised 'I.' By consciously avoiding capitalisation of the first-person pronoun while referring to herself, Shakur suggests that her personal story is less important than the representative value of her experiences.

Shakur's entire text is composed as a series of chapters that juxtapose the author's journey from her childhood to the moment of her arrest with her prison experiences. The chapters alternate between her life before incarceration—her growing-up years, the circumstances and events that instigate her gradual politicisation and her ultimate joining of the Black Liberation Army—and life post her arrest and detainment. Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography*, then, is as much a prison memoir as it is a "coming-to-consciousness" narrative. The text traces the conversion of the author from a state of innocence or naivete

regarding America and its history to a realisation of the same and how that recognition grooms her identity as a Black woman revolutionary. And it is Shakur's experiences as a Black girl in a racist White society and the knowledge garnered from them that serve as triggers behind her political evolution. Her autobiography, then, in that it describes the process of coming to political consciousness of Black children who transform into radical activists, puts a challenge to classic conversion narratives.

While describing her childhood years, Shakur is careful to depict the socialisation processes that fill the Black child with self-hatred and consequently with negative images of the self. Through a portrayal of her formative years, the author shows how Blacks in America are gradually inducted into this dilemma whereby they start hating themselves without comprehending the real reason behind that self-hatred. As the author says about her young self, she had become "a puppet" who "didn't even know who was pulling the strings" (38). *Assata: An Autobiography,* thus, enumerates how self-hatred gets infused into the very psychology of young Black children which then becomes evident in their everyday dealings with each other. Talking about the self-derogatory words that she and her friends often employed, Shakur comments:

> [B]ehind our fights, self-hatred was clearly visible…We would…talk about each other's ugly, big lips and flat noses…call each other pickaninnies and nappy-haired so-and-so's…Black made any insult worse. When you called somebody a "Black bastard," now that was terrible. In fact, when i was growing up, being called "Black," was grounds for fighting. (30)

By highlighting such childhood experiences, Shakur shows how Black children are socialised into accepting White superiority and conversely Black inferiority in everything. This subconscious acceptance ultimately leads to a sense of shame in one's own culture, traditions and even language. She, for instance, mentions how her grandparents who "tried to instil in [her] a sense of personal dignity" and were indeed "really fanatic" about her maintaining it especially in her dealings with White people, were actually infusing her with notions of Black inadequacy.

To her grandparents, "pride and dignity were hooked up to…what white people had" (19-20). The author as a child is, thus, trained into this unconscious blind adherence to white standards even while she was taught about upholding Black pride and dignity:

> I was supposed to be a child version of a goodwill ambassador, out to prove that Black people were not stupid or dirty or smelly or uncultured. I never questioned the things they thought were good…And everything that they wanted, I wanted. (36-37)

The attitude of Shakur's grandparents and the expectations they put upon her child self exemplifies the way dominant white culture penetrates into Black society and creates an identical class based hierarchical structure. In their refusal to allow her to play with "alley rats"—the name given by her grandmother to children belonging often to the poorest Black families—they showcase how better positioned Blacks start feeling ashamed of those lower down the social hierarchy.

As the adult author mentions in her autobiography, to her grandparents, "decency" came to be linked with being socio-economically well-off:

> How did you know what a decent family was? A decent family lived in a decent house. How did you know what a decent house was? A decent house was fixed up nice and had a sidewalk in front of it….These decent little [children] were invariably the offspring of Wilmington's Black doctors, lawyers, preachers, and undertakers. Schoolteachers, barbershop owners, and the editor of the "colored" newspaper were also decent. (21)

In the depiction of the grandparents and in her disapproval of their beliefs, then, Shakur exposes how Black bourgeois culture creates divisions and hampers the growth of the Black race as a whole. She shows the irony whereby Blacks fashion their society/community as a replica of the White society. Continuing with her account of how she was made to doubt the merits of her own Black culture, she mentions:

> I saved my culture, my music, my dancing, the richness of Black speech for the times when i was with my own people…In many ways i was living a double existence. (37)

Shakur's "double existence" like Du Bois's "double consciousness" is psychologically damaging and can negatively affect the Black person's notions of self-worth. The sense of agency, of having the freedom to make choices and decisions is an essential way by which a human being comes to value himself/herself. In the absence of it, he/she may be driven into a sort of existential meaninglessness. Shakur's autobiography, in this regard, narrates

the kind of purposelessness that she is forced to imbibe as a teenager. This lack of purpose and goals is reflected in her decision to leave formal education at barely seventeen years of age.

Looking back, the author comments on the lack of positive opportunities and work environments for Blacks in America and the kind of "meaninglessness" that this helps generate:

> I wasn't doing anything positive. I wasn't making anything, creating anything, or contributing to anything. After a while, i wanted to tell them to take their papers and their job and shove it. (149)

It is her desire to change this social order which turns "Blackness" to "ugliness" that propels Shakur's resistant activities later in life. Never having been taught the phrase "Black is beautiful" as a child, she makes it her mission to consciously celebrate her Blackness later. And as a way of doing that, she adopts an African name along with educating herself and fellow Blacks in African cultural heritage. Changing her name from Joanne Deborah Chesimard—the identity she had assumed post her first marriage, she becomes Assata Olugbala Shakur.

As mentioned in her autobiography, the change of name is a consciously taken decision—one that symbolises her African roots and hence is a major step in her political transformation. The African name—Assata signifying "[s]he who struggles," Olugbala meaning "[l]ove for the people," and Shakur, which she adopted out of respect for Zayd Shakur, meaning "the thankful"—is as much a political statement as it is a reclaiming of ancestral legacy and is representative of her denunciation of American culture and ideology (186). With a conscious change of name, Shakur not only locates herself in African culture but also arms herself for future challenges to the dominant White American society.

It is Shakur's association with the Golden Drums Society which "concentrated its efforts on Black culture and history" (186) in Manhattan City College that shapes her political ideology. Much of that ideology expresses itself in reversing the psychological damages already done to most American Blacks, as is indicated by the change of name from "Chesimard" to "Olugbala Shakur". When she volunteers as a teacher for young Black children as part of the social service activities of the society, also for instance, she

consciously tries to change and rectify the negative images of Blackness that these children had been brainwashed into accepting and believing. She structures her lectures and class activities so as to allow discussions of "the different kinds of beauty that people have" including that of "Black people" and gradually moulds the children into appreciating their own selves irrespective of their colour, physical features or the texture of their skin and hair (188).

Shakur mentions the healing effects of this new found awareness and unashamed acceptance of her Black identity proffered by her radical activities:

> The more active i became the more i liked it. It was like medicine, making me well, making me whole. I was home. For the first time, my life felt like it had some real meaning. (189)

The author, here, quite explicitly brings out the relation between activism and trauma healing. Shakur's activist works as a member of the Golden Drums Society which brings her closer to African heritage ultimately presents her with empowered self-images and thereby, paves the way towards healing her fractured, fragmented psyche. The earlier sense of purposelessness is replaced by a sense and awareness of the positive changes that one can bring about.

Assata: An Autobiography, however, with its parallel depiction of Shakur's life before and after her ultimate arrest exposes the cyclical pattern in which trauma and activism get implicated. While her induction into radical activism and participation in constructive social action supposedly heals the racialised trauma of growing up as a Black in America, such activism also brings her face to face with repressive state machineries such as the police, prison and other law enforcement systems. This ultimately exposes her to more direct, state sponsored trauma like physical as well as psychological torture during incarceration.

Shakur's autobiographical account, in fact, begins with her confrontation with the New Jersey State Police which results in her arrest and subsequent imprisonment. The author's choice of words while describing these circumstances highlights the bodily torture that she is subjected to. The mutilation of her body in the confrontation and the lack of medical care and attention even when she is apparently 'hospitalised' after her arrest shows the complicity of the state health care system in perpetuating acts of injustice. The author

in her documentation of such injustice shows the disregard and lack of empathy with which people and especially Black people booked by the law are treated by so called healthcare professionals. She refers to the utter objectification of her body in her description of the head doctor who "pokes and prods, throwing [her] around like a rag doll" in the name of examining her (4).

Foucault, in this regard, talks about the way these state machineries use the "power of writing" in order to assert their authoritative control over the prisoners. This power is expressed in the way the penal system remains obsessed with a thorough registration and documentation of the prisoners' every detail. As Shakur narrates in her autobiography, the first thing that the police try to achieve after her arrest is the accumulation of all information relating to her. She is physically examined and fingerprinted. And although they fail in extracting anything, the cops repeatedly question her regarding her name and political affiliations. According to Foucault, such 'writing' of the prisoner into the state records "functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection." The writing, thus, fulfils a political function but "in a quite different technique of power" (Harlow 124-125).

This power is also manipulated by the media industry when instead of gathering and stating factual data, they set about vilifying detainees. As Shakur writes:

> [T]he press was trying to railroad me, to make me seem like a monster. According to them i was a common criminal, just going around shooting down cops for the hell of it. (49)

It is this knowledge of the "power of writing" that, according to Harlow, motivates censorship on the circulation of reading and writing materials within prison walls. Such restriction is all the more strictly imposed in the case of political detainees. In her autobiography, Shakur documents the ban on newspapers and magazines inside most detainment centres that she was kept. As a political prisoner, she was also denied access to television and radio which the other common prisoners were allowed. To quote Harlow, "[e]ssential to the maintenance of political fraternity inside the prison is the dissemination of information from outside" (Harlow 129). The ban is a strategic measure to disrupt the detainee's connection with the happenings of the outside world as much as possible so as to prevent any further resistant activities inside the prison.

Another way in which the prisoner's sense of autonomy or any personality is sought to be broken is through the behaviour of the prison authorities. Shakur, for instance, mentions a jail warden, Mrs. Butterworth in the Middlesex County Workhouse where she was initially detained, who insisted on 'infantilising' her along with the other inmates by always referring to them as "girls" and addressing them by their first names. The author, however, fights back by emphasising her status as a "grown woman" and asking to be called by her last name. When the warden refuses, Shakur retaliates by calling her "Miss Bitch" (47-48).

What serves as one of the most traumatic things for detainees is, however, the break in filial ties caused by the imprisonment. *Assata: An Autobiography* documents the psychological torture carried out on those detainees who had left behind their families, especially their children. Speaking about how one of the harshest prison rules in the Middlesex County Workhouse was the prohibition of children from paying visits to their imprisoned mothers, the author comments on the way such isolation served as a punishment not just for the mothers but also the children who kept "waiting outside…with sad, frustrated faces" (53). The "fanatic screams" (ibid) of the women calling out to their children to no avail similarly indicates the psychological turmoil to which they are subjected by such prison rules.

Shakur herself has to bear the pain of separation from her daughter, Kakuya Amala Olugbala Shakur, whom she conceives while facing trial with a fellow Black revolutionary named Kamau in a bank robbery case at the Federal Court in New York. The decision to allow the conception of a new life while still within the confines of the American legal and penal system was itself an act of resistance, a conscious and hopeful acceptance of life in the face of all atrocities. This, however, does little to shield either Shakur or her daughter from the pain that the severing of the mother-child bond right after birth causes. The author mentions the anger that is built up in the child as a consequence of this separation. In fact, a four-year-old Kakuya accuses her mother of 'willingly' staying behind bars and even refuses to accept her as mother. Shakur narrates in her autobiography the confusion of Kakuya regarding her real mother:

She calls me Mommy Assata and she calls my mother Mommy. (258)

The most painful sight for Shakur—one that makes her "cry until [she] vomit(s)"—however, is that of her daughter pulling, pushing, hitting, and kicking the prison bars in an attempt to "open" them and let her out (ibid).

Psychological torture, then, is an important way through which prison authorities seek to break prisoners. Another potent mechanism to break the prisoner is solitary confinement. Shakur speaks of the way she went mute after extended periods of such confinement, "i would forget how to talk" (83). American law and the judiciary, however, apparently remain blind to the gross human rights violations that solitary confinement represents. When Evelyn, Shakur's lawyer, files a petition against the mental handicap that it induced on her client, she is required to back it up with "psychological data" and expert opinions. The difficulty in finding such professionals who would support a Black woman with their statements is of course well known.

Solitary confinement has evolved from being a sort of corrective measure employed to make the prisoner "introspect," and "meditate" on the crime committed to a mode of mental torture intended to "destroy the psychological integrity of the isolated prisoner" (Harlow 151). Since political prisoners are feared to start off voices and acts of dissent even within the confines of the prison system, authorities try to destroy any affiliation that might develop between the detainees. Here too, solitary confinement comes in handy.

Prison memoirs like that of Shakur's, then, document the process of re-traumatisation of activists who had sought to heal the collective social trauma of living in an unjust world order through their radical activism. The sense of agency conferred by change-oriented meaningful social action is threatened by their subjection to mechanisms of abuse such as objectification, infantilisation, and near constant surveillance. Prison memoirs, thus, serve as important documents in understanding the cyclical flow of trauma triggers. A break in this cycle, as such texts exemplify, can only be possible in the context of a total elimination of traumatic markers in an egalitarian and just society.

A Taste of Power

Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story,* in sharp contrast to Davis' and Shakur's narratives, presents internal clashes and conflicts of interest within one of the most prominent political/activist organization of the Black Power Movement—the Black

Panther Party (BPP). In the autobiography, Brown traces a journey that reveals as much about her individual story as about the strengths, weaknesses and loopholes that marked the Black Power Movement in general and the BPP in particular. As opposed to a strict eulogising of party ideals or the merits of the Black movement, generally seen in activist autobiography, her text puts forth to readers an insider's view of the workings of the once "most militant organization in America" (3). Perkins ascribes this unapologetic depiction of intimate or private details to Brown's motivations behind writing the text:

> Brown seems less concerned with writing a "political autobiography"…than with reconciling the meaning of her own past involvement in political struggle. This is reflected both in her narrative's avowedly personal slant…and her transgressing of the kinds of strategic silences observed in other activists' texts. (Perkins 12)

The author's narrative distance from the events described—the fact that she writes her autobiography after being disillusioned with the misogyny and power politics within the BPP and leaving it—allows her to see them only in relation to their contribution in shaping her identity. Unlike Davis and Shakur who had emphasized the collective struggles more than their personal experiences, Brown's "Introduction" insists that it is "her life" that is being chronicled:

> Reflected here is life as I lived it, my thoughts and feelings as I remember them…Memory seems a fragile spirit. It may be a river of reality that gathers dreams and desires and change in its flow. (*A Taste of Power* xi)

Instead of making the autobiographical "I" a mere medium to share the group's political ideologies, Brown asserts its authority over the narrative.

What the narrative also does is to highlight the psychic operations of a Black activist woman's mind. She exposes how external showcasing of strength and power can actually be a way to hide vulnerability or helplessness. Brown's *A Taste of Power* depicts the revelatory journey of an apparently powerful Black woman through her ordeals with issues of mental health, subsequent addiction to drugs, and sexist denigration from her own fellow Panther brothers that makes her question her identity and sexuality.

The text starts with the author's assumption of absolute power over the BPP in the absence of its founder leader, Huey Newton who has been forced to fly away to Cuba. The psychosexual dimension of power is emphasized when Brown speaks of its 'therapeutic'

value. Having been a victim of Newton's "madness" a few days ahead of her assuming leadership when he slapped her for thanking him, the knowledge that she now has complete power is almost healing to her. Indeed, despite the fact that she was proclaiming authority over a party where she herself had experienced the misogynous attitude of comrades and whose members she knew would "balk at a woman as the leader of the Black Panther Party," such proclamation "felt natural" to her (3-4). Speaking of how the new found power helps in recuperating her broken self, Brown writes:

> The feelings that washed over me as I spoke were baptismal. There was something in that moment that seemed a reparation for all the rage and pain of my life. (6)

This "baptismal" effect comes in the context of the party members'—to whom she had been addressing her first speech after assuming leadership—unquestioning acceptance of her as the replacement of Huey Newton. Brown's opening statement that she has "all the guns and all the money" and "can withstand challenge from without and from within" not only serves as a warning to the panthers but also as a sort of assurance to her own self (3).

The sense of power is especially recuperative given the context of Brown's earlier degeneration into feelings of utter meaninglessness and purposelessness. In fact, she notes how even as a child she had moments of existential crisis especially during the night when she would be grabbed by an unexplainable feeling, "Mama! Mama! It's that feeling!" (20). This feeling which usually comes when the young child is unable to place her poverty-stricken condition—the "darkness" and "nothingness" of her room "accompanied by the magnified sounds of mice scurrying"—within the context of her grandmother's providential God who would supposedly deliver her from all miseries is reflective of her deeply felt anguish. This same vulnerability is carried on in to her adolescence and even later on when she joins the BPP.

Brown is introduced to communism by Jay Kennedy, the old white man thirty-three years her senior with whom she enters in a relationship and later breaks up. Their discussions of communism help the author in placing her childhood fears in perspective—she starts seeing her lack of purpose as something derived from the injustices of a racist society which hinders any scope of growth for Blacks. Ironically, this same awareness ultimately leads to their breaking apart. Once when they were in San Francisco and had gone for a dinner to a restaurant named Eddie's, a young Black boy who was serving as the doorman came to attend them. Without betraying any sign of hatred or shame, he

carried on his task—opening the limousine door for Brown and giving her his hand to assist her. The author dressed in designer clothes gifted by her White lover is, however, mortified and brought face to face with her duplicitous existence. She once again is trapped by her childhood paranoia, the "constant longing for identity, the old "feeling"" (95). Although the boy shows no reaction and says nothing, she could feel him cursing her, "I heard him, though he said nothing at all. He called me "bitch" (ibid). While activists like Shakur had called a White woman "bitch" because of her misappropriation of power, in a complete reversal of situation Brown imagines herself being addressed with such derogatory terms. This realisation of having drifted away from her true identity and origin makes her ashamed of herself and gradually instils in her the desire to be an agent of positive change.

Similarly, her chance acquaintance with a woman named Beverly Bruce brings her closer to the reality of the conditions of Blacks in America. On her request, Brown goes to give piano lessons to a group of Black girls in an apartment in the Jordan Downs Housing Project which, according to her, was nothing but "a sprawling camp of desolation" (99). Seeing the "blankness" in the expression of the girls, Brown writes:

> There was my face, my pain, my nothing-little-nigger-girl expression lingering on their faces and in their eyes. (100)

She further illustrates:

> I saw the poverty of our lives, the poverty of little black girls who live on the same planet, in the same world where people, people like me, drank expensive bottles of champagne that clouded the mind with bubbles that obliterated them, us. (ibid)

It is this coming face to face with her own childhood self that makes her question her complicity in the American economic system which relegates fellow Blacks to deplorable conditions. Much like Shakur's coming to political consciousness, these encounters shape Brown's heightened awareness of her racial identity and solidarity. Comparing her relative luxury with the "ghetto myopia" to which she believed these young girls were "doomed", the author realises the need for more definitive and affirmative action which would create a better world "in which to grow" (101).

The realisation to work for the upliftment of Blacks in America, then, marks Brown's entry into Black militant action. The "old fears," sense of "dissociation" and

“separation from everything” however, continues even after her official joining of the BPP (146). Indeed, during her initial days when she was tasked with selling Panther newspapers, she is so traumatised that she has to seek help from a mental-health clinic. In her conversation with the doctor (whom she later discovers to be a psychiatric social worker and not a doctor), the confusion and purposelessness that has gripped her mind is obvious. When she is asked about her feelings, she fumbles for an adequate expression for her “lifetime of desperation and fear and self-hatred”(148). The desire to be a member of the BPP and yet her inability to whole-heartedly embrace it along with the realisation that there was nothing else that could give her life meaning fills her with a void, which like her childhood anxiety, she is unable to explain.

Brown is ultimately prescribed “Thorazine” to which she starts becoming addicted. The drug fills her momentarily with a sense of euphoria that she is unable to give up: “I lived in a lovely stupor. Thinking was no longer required. Pain was a memory” (149). It is only with the support and intervention of fellow comrade John Huggins that she is able to come out of her Thorazine addiction. Huggins guides her out of her initial doubts and fears regarding the decision to join a militant organization and instils in her again the desire to do something with her life and for her people (152).

As Brown becomes more and more involved in the party, gradually rising its ranks, she is however, made aware of the flaws within the party system. One of the things to which she was particularly opposed was the misogyny rampant in the attitudes of the panther brothers. Although Brown herself could enter the party’s Central Committee and become Huey Newton’s close confidante, most Black women members were relegated to inferior positions and had to deal with the sexism of men. Indeed, Brown’s text serves to expose unseen facets of prominent panther leaders. In one of the meetings that she attends, the author observes Bobby Seale’s extremely sexist treatment of a fifteen-year-old panther sister named Marsha. Marsha is forced by Seale to degrade herself by offering her sexuality as something to be used and abused by the panther men. In her enunciation of the duties and obligations of panther women, the young girl, still an adolescent, is pushed on to mention how one of those duties was to never deny her body to any of the panther brothers while preserving her modesty in the hands of White men. By divulging such information, Brown’s autobiography creates a space for retrospective deliberation on what went wrong within the BPP in particular and the Movement in general. The text, written after she leaves

the Party, allows her sufficient narrative distance from the events described which, in turn, enables her to recognize and be critical of the flaws and divisions within the Black struggle.

The fact that Brown cannot do much despite being witness to such abuses of power and indeed even opens herself to Huey Newton's unpredictable temperament and often whimsical demands takes a toll upon her mental well-being which ultimately leads to her decision to leave the party. In highlighting the abject misuses of position and power within the party, *A Taste* also brings forth the sadistic dimension to power plays. The author, for instance, notes the way severe punishments and military disciplining were an important way in which the authority of the leaders was maintained. In fact, as Brown notes, she comes to stiffen herself against such tortures executed on members who fail the party in some way by trying to assure herself of the necessity of disciplinary action.

In one of her last meetings with Newton before he has to escape to Cuba, the latter was disciplining a member who had supposedly stolen from the party. Marvelling at her lack of sympathy for the person, the author writes:

> I ignored the bloodied face of the thief, as I had learned to do. I had become hardened to such things, like a Green Beret who learns to think nothing of taking a life: after seeing so many training films on brutal killings, he is no longer repulsed by blood or brutality. (9)

Such "hardened" emotions taken together with Brown's own sadistic enjoyment of the power she generates once she takes over Huey Newton's position as the party chief shows how power remains implicated with psychosexual aspects.

In this regard, Perkins notes the 'erotic' aspect of power that Brown's text highlights. She establishes this by citing an instance from the text where the author speaks of the "sensuous" feeling one gets on realising "that at one's will an enemy can be struck down, a friend saved" (319). Perkins, however, also talks of the way this sense of power actually turns out to be momentary and even illusory for Brown:

> Since the authority Brown is permitted to exercise over the organization emanates from Huey Newton, Newton always remains the power to usurp control at any time…Brown's power is merely "a taste." (123)

Brown's assumption of supreme leadership during Newton's absence, as Perkins observes, helps her get "a taste of power" but not the power itself. Her decision to finally leave the party comes after Huey, on returning from Cuba, allows some panther brothers to physically assault a woman member, Regina Davis as punishment for verbally reprimanding one of them. Brown's autobiographical text, which reveals such 'inside' information about a Party hugely influential as well as instrumental during the Black Power Movement, shows the author's increasing disillusionment with the Party objectives and principles. Her account, in as much as it is a retelling of her life, also seems to be an attempt at justifying her decision to ultimately leave the BPP.

Brown seems burdened with the pressure to project herself in a positive light after what can be interpreted as her abandonment of the Party and with it, the larger Black cause. Her *A Taste of Power*, thus, shows the psychological effects of power or the lack of it within the context of the larger Black Movement. Unlike the other authors discussed here whose struggles were with the outside White world and whose activism-generated trauma ensued from their confrontation with repressive state machineries, Brown' s psychological equilibrium is troubled and tested not just by outsiders but by the power equations at play in her own party.

For the autobiographers under scrutiny in this chapter, participation in resistant activities has not been a choice but a response to a painfully realised call for action. As the autobiographies narrate, radical action in the face of social injustices seemed to offer hopes for positive alterations in the social fabric. However, while their activism transformed them from passive victims into harbingers of change, it also exposed them to further violence and pain. It is through this cyclical frame in which we have placed traumatic social inequities and resistant political action that the texts under scrutiny have been approached or analysed. All the texts vouch for the fact that the cycle can be disrupted or brought to an end only when the social structure is 'permanently' changed for the better.

In conclusion, then, this chapter has tried to evaluate the chosen activist autobiographies in terms of their depiction of the mental processes that encourage or discourage activist action. By studying the ways in which the authors were gradually politicised, we have sought to understand the role of affirmative social action as an underrepresented but meaningful mechanism of trauma healing and recovery. Finally, the

chapter by its examination of how activism itself can result in severe psychic damages, highlights the otherwise ignored fact of the ‘retraumatisation’ of political activists.